

# Custom: More Than A Rifle

A big game rifle built to order comes with character,  
*even when it's not yours.*





*Best-quality British double rifles, like this early Hollis in .450-400, are built to order, the stock fitted to the shooter, who chooses not just the bore, but barrel length and contour, engraving details.*

By **Wayne van Zwoll**  
B&C Professional Member  
*Photos courtesy of Author*

He looked too young for his age, with not a thread of silver in that dark chestnut hair. He talked without visibly taking a breath, all the while deftly rasping walnut. He recalled people and times you'd encountered only in back issues of *Outdoor Life*. To a young shooter who measured all rifles against Jack O'Connor's Featherweight .270, the basement shop of Alvin Biesen held more than custom rifles under construction. It was a link to the halcyon days of hunting, to giants of an industry with fading fortunes.

*Wyoming gunmaker Nate Heineke built this .35 Whelen on a Springfield action and installed a lovely cocking-piece sight. Note clean detailing, color-case finish.*

"I was born in LaCrosse, Wisconsin, during World War I," Al told me then. "As a lad, I worked in a blacksmith shop, where I had to supply some of the coal. It cost \$3.25 a ton, so I gleaned what I could from a Milwaukee roundhouse. I learned to shrink steel wheels on wood-spoked rims and once shod a team of Clydesdales in 28 minutes. I haven't lost a day's work since 1936, when I had a WPA job that paid 50 cents an hour.

"I hunted ducks in 1933 or 1934, the last year it was legal to use live decoys. We tethered mallard hens on water, then pinched a captive drake to get them all to talk. I married Genevieve in 1937. The next year I bought a DCM Springfield for five dollars, to hunt whitetail deer. Shortly after that I got one of the first Weaver Chokes and adapted the idea to rifles by counter-boring and porting a barrel.

"About then I threw in with seven pals to buy 40 logged acres for deer hunting. Opportunity had a lot to do with limits. I once dropped five deer in a pile with a .35 Remington autoloader, a Model 81. The farmer wanted the meat. Another time I fired at five running deer with 180-grain Bronze Points from a .30-40 Krag and killed three. Mostly we shot for meat. Trophy hunting didn't become popular until after the war. We had fun shooting. After a pheasant hunt in South Dakota, some friends and I photographed our 1934 Plymouth draped with 150 roosters.

"During the war I decided to get into the ammunition business. So I ordered 20,000 8mm bullets from Vernon Speer, assuming I'd earn enough working for Autolite to pay for them before they arrived. They came right away. In those days people like Vernon gave you the slack you needed. I got 13 bushels of surplus .30-06 ammo and 300 pounds of 4895 powder and used the Autolite shop to handload the lot.

"I moved to Spokane in 1948, just after O'Connor wrote his first article about me. I bought my house for \$8,000, later sold it for \$10,000, then bought it back for \$6,000 and moved it to where it is now. I've raised four boys and two girls, and my boy Roger came back to work with me after a 15-year stint as a machinist. Not many gunmakers

can say they've supported their families entirely from the shop.

"In the late '30s, shortly after he started writing, I asked Jack O'Connor about building a rifle for him. He shipped me a Titus barrel and a Springfield action. I made the stock. He didn't fancy the rifle, so I made him a .30-06 on Mauser metal. He paid for that job. O'Connor's writings gave me a leg up at just the right time. He made me the most famous gunmaker in the world! Jack introduced me to important men like Prince Abdorezza Pahlavi of Iran. The prince ordered two rifles from me because he couldn't hit with his .375 Holland. After he left the throne he bought five more. Hunters like him have done wildlife lots of good. But hunting doesn't captivate people as it once did. I'd pay to interest youngsters in shooting sports." Al told me he'd donated \$4,000 for range work at the Spokane Rifle Club.

A competitive shooter as well as a hunter, Al served as a range officer at local small-bore matches. My eyes were better in those days, and my scores higher. "You shoot a 37 too?" he asked me once. Most riflemen at the top of the board used Anschutz 1413s, Winchester 52s. My Remington wore a McMillan that shot into one hole at 50 meters and occasionally brought me all the marbles. Later, Al would offer me his Model 37, a beautiful rifle he had stocked. With a young family and a mortgage, even a fair price for such a rifle seemed to me out of reach. In a fit of insanity, I told him I was a little short at the moment.

But that wasn't the only Biesen rifle that slipped away. At a gun show years ago, I spied a lovely Winchester 52 Sporter that had been restocked. It had clean, hauntingly familiar lines and that gunny feel you can't quite explain. The inletting was exceptionally tight, the

checking sharp and fine. Honey-hued, with black and orange accents, the wood appeared to be French. With \$300 in my pocket, I was \$275 shy of the tagged price. I wound my way through the crowd to find a savvy pal with more cash. "There's a 52 you might want to see." He followed me, and started stripping bills before he picked it up. "A Biesen," he said. "A bargain."

Most of Al's rifles were centerfires. He preferred Winchester 70 and Mauser 98 actions. Buyers could choose the barrel. They could also tell Al what they wanted by way of detailing. Al might or might not comply. He had his own notions about rifles. Among features that distinguished his rifles from those of other celebrated makers, the comb nose is perhaps most noticeable. Cheek-rests, grips and checkering patterns evolved over Al's career. But the comb nose stayed much the same. I like it.

The generation of talented stockmakers who practiced in the early post-war era is now all but gone. Retired from *Outdoor Life* in 1972, Jack O'Connor died of natural causes at sea in 1978. Roger Biesen carries on in his father's shop. Tom Shelhammer and Monte Kennedy, Len Brownell and Alvin Linden—they've long since passed. Darwin Hensley no longer builds his beautiful single-shots. Jerry Fisher, in Biesen's time a young and promising woodworker, still crafts top-quality rifles in the classic style he and his colleagues refined more than half a century ago.

**BELOW: Buzz Fletcher built this svelte Mauser, barreling it to .256 Newton. Exotic chamberings and period styling are among the prerogatives you buy with a custom firearm.**



**RIGHT: GreyBull Precision stocks don't offer the cosmetic elegance of finely crafted wood or svelte synthetics. But these rifles shoot accurately to extreme distance. Beauty is as beauty does.**



“O’Connor’s writings gave me a leg up at just the right time. He made me the most famous gunmaker in the world! Jack introduced me to important men like Prince Abdorezza Pahlavi of Iran. The prince ordered two rifles from me because he couldn’t hit with his .375 Holland. After he left the throne he bought five more. Hunters like him have done wildlife lots of good.”

Careful shaping of the grip to fit the shooter’s hand finishes, properly, with the steel grip cap in place, for a joint you can’t feel. Handwork on custom rifles hikes the price.

018213

**NIGHTFORCE®**



Nightforce Compacts are available with capped hunting or exposed target-style adjustments.

Our new Power Throw Lever allows instant magnification changes, even while wearing gloves.



**NIGHTFORCE®**

Nightforce Optics, Inc.  
336 Hazen Lane • Orofino, ID 83544  
208.476.9814  
NightforceOptics.com

**THERE IS NOTHING  
COMPACT  
ABOUT NORTH AMERICA.  
FORTUNATELY, THERE IS  
ABOUT OUR RIFLESCOPES.**

1-4 x 24 NXS™ Compact  
8.8 inches, 17 ounces



2.5-10 x 32 NXS™ Compact  
12 inches, 19 ounces

Hunting is tough enough without being burdened with a massive scope having more size than substance. Originally developed for the U.S. military, Nightforce NXS™ Compacts are light in weight, short in length, and long on features... outperforming many riflescopes twice as large. They're proof that size is no substitute for quality.

Our new IHR™ stands for International Hunting Reticle, with good reason. Illumination is standard.

## Custom, for you

Rifles built to fit and please you, specifically, can help you shoot better. Mostly, they support surly artists who work wonders in walnut and steel. “Life is too short to hunt with an ugly gun,” they mutter, a delicate curl of honey French fleeing a slender chisel tip. OK. Life is too short. For just about everything. You plunk down a deposit that in my youth would have snared you a new F-150.

Then you wait for five years. I did, for my last custom rifle. Or was it six?


What makes the delay worthwhile is the result. Commercial manufacturers have proven woefully inept in crafting nimble, fetching firearms. Now, some of the pale-faced people bent over CAD images of nascent rifles must have an eye for line, and hands that delight in fine balance—perhaps a deep disdain for injection-molded polymer. But when the order comes down for a deer gun to peddle at \$499, dreams of thin-shelled walnut and rust-blued steel fly away.

Enter D’Arcy Echols and Gene Simillion, Steve Heilmann and the team of David Miller and Curt Crum. These talented gunmakers not only fashion exquisite stocks but, like Al Biesen and Len Brownell in earlier days, do fine metal-work. In fact the field of top-flight craftsmen has never been richer. My rack holds a stunning rifle stocked by Gary Goudy, a wizard with walnut. Patrick Holehan fashioned another in clean, classic style, with both walnut and laminated stocks and his sleek, seamless “square bridge” blocks.

Have a special project? These craftsmen, and other members of the American Custom Gun Guild, can do what you’d think impossible. Fancy wood and machining ups the ante, of course. Ditto engraving, and color case work from Doug Turnbull. If your budget only recently left Walmart’s gun counter behind, you can still chase a custom rifle.

“Spec out” a hand-laid synthetic stock instead of hand-checked walnut. Fit it to a well-designed barreled action that requires no machining. Install a new trigger instead of \$200 scope rings or a quarter rib. You’ll have a useful rifle that performs well for you. Don’t overlook hungry young gun- and stockmakers. A few years ago I turned a ragged Savage 99 over to Glenrock, Wyoming, gunsmith Phil Filing. With his protege Doug Mosier (who now runs Filings’ bluing and metal-working shop), he made the steel like new. Wes Taylor, a block down the street, found two pieces of figured American walnut, fitting them with care and cutting attractive checkered panels. He shaped the stock like a pro.

Shopping for craftsmen, avoid ‘smiths with piles of hunting rifles to fix or refinish. For a custom rifle, you want someone who builds appealing hardware from the ground up. Insist on flat metal surfaces, with no rounding of corners or screw holes. You’ll want filled pores in wood, seams you can’t feel. Look closely at past work before committing. Better to keep a rifle plain but well executed, than to add features under the same budget lid. Mediocrity is unbecoming a custom rifle.



**Gary Goudy stocked this exquisite rifle, a Model 70 barreled to .35 G&H (the .375 H&H necked down). Goudy is one of the best checkers alive, a master stockmaker.**

Among the lesser known stockmakers of that era was Iver Henriksen. I’d not heard of him until a Mauser he’d stocked turned up at a gun show. I bought it from a fellow who’d bought it from the estate of a doctor who’d not been able to sneak his guns past the pearly gates. That’s a useful thing to remember. Your rifle will probably outlast you, and you will one day be separated from it.

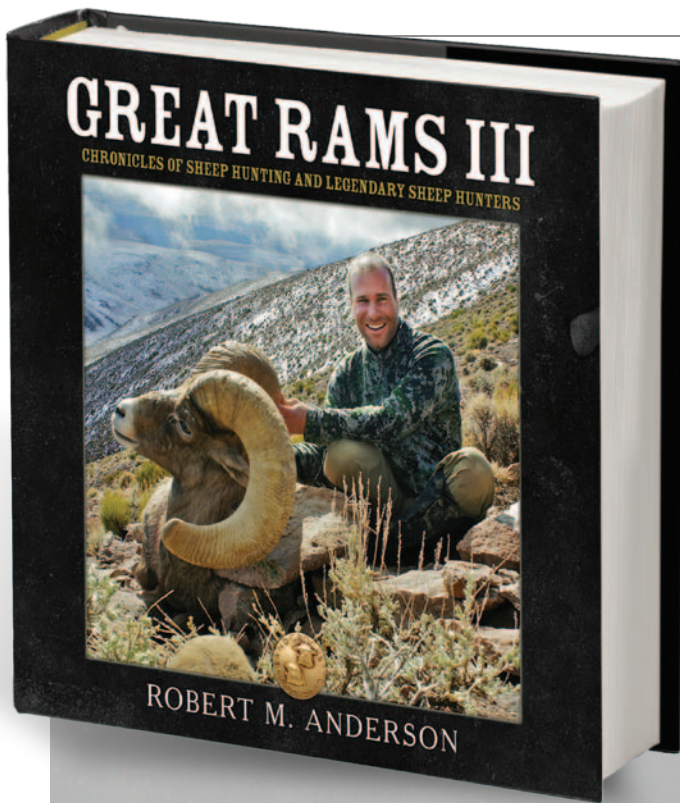
Toting that .270 into the eastern Oregon hills, I managed to lay low a couple of mule deer bucks. Then I sought out the fellow who’d had, it seemed, several Henriksens on his show table. “Come visit and look at the rest,” he said, over the phone.

Eventually I would own half a dozen. All would sift away in later trades—unconscionable stupidity! I shot my first bighorn ram with one, under a 6x Pecos scope. Another, with a 2 1/2x Lyman, killed my first elk. During that time, with interviews and help from unpublished notes, I pieced together the remarkable story of their first owner....

The campfire is a place of release. With or without help from Johnny Walker, captains of industry become like children. The outfitter and the guide, the horse wrangler and the cook lend a collective and sympathetic ear to powerful men brought properly low by immense country and challenges they cannot delegate. The camp jack hears what wives, business associates, and mistresses never will.

But it is rare that a man of means removed from the field bares his soul on paper to the raw men whose resourcefulness draws him out on the hunt.

“I’ll just bet that you think I’m one funny nut for writing you, but so many of your fine friends are my best friends.... You know, Bob Brownell, Thomas Shelhammer, Keith Stegall, Bill Sukalle, and Jack O’Connor are my very best friends....” So began the strange, and largely unilateral, correspondence



Stories of legendary sheep hunts and hunters, colorful photographs, features on historic trophy areas and conservation efforts, and a look at yesterday's—and today's—sheep hunters.

**B**oone and Crockett Club is excited to offer the third installment of Robert Anderson's *Great Rams* series of books. This new edition features brilliant full-color printing in a high-quality binding that is sure to please collectors. With over 400 images—historical photos, B&C score charts, modern field photos from decades of sheep hunting—and ten captivating chapters about sheep hunting history and adventures, *Great Rams III* will keep readers enthralled every time they turn a page!

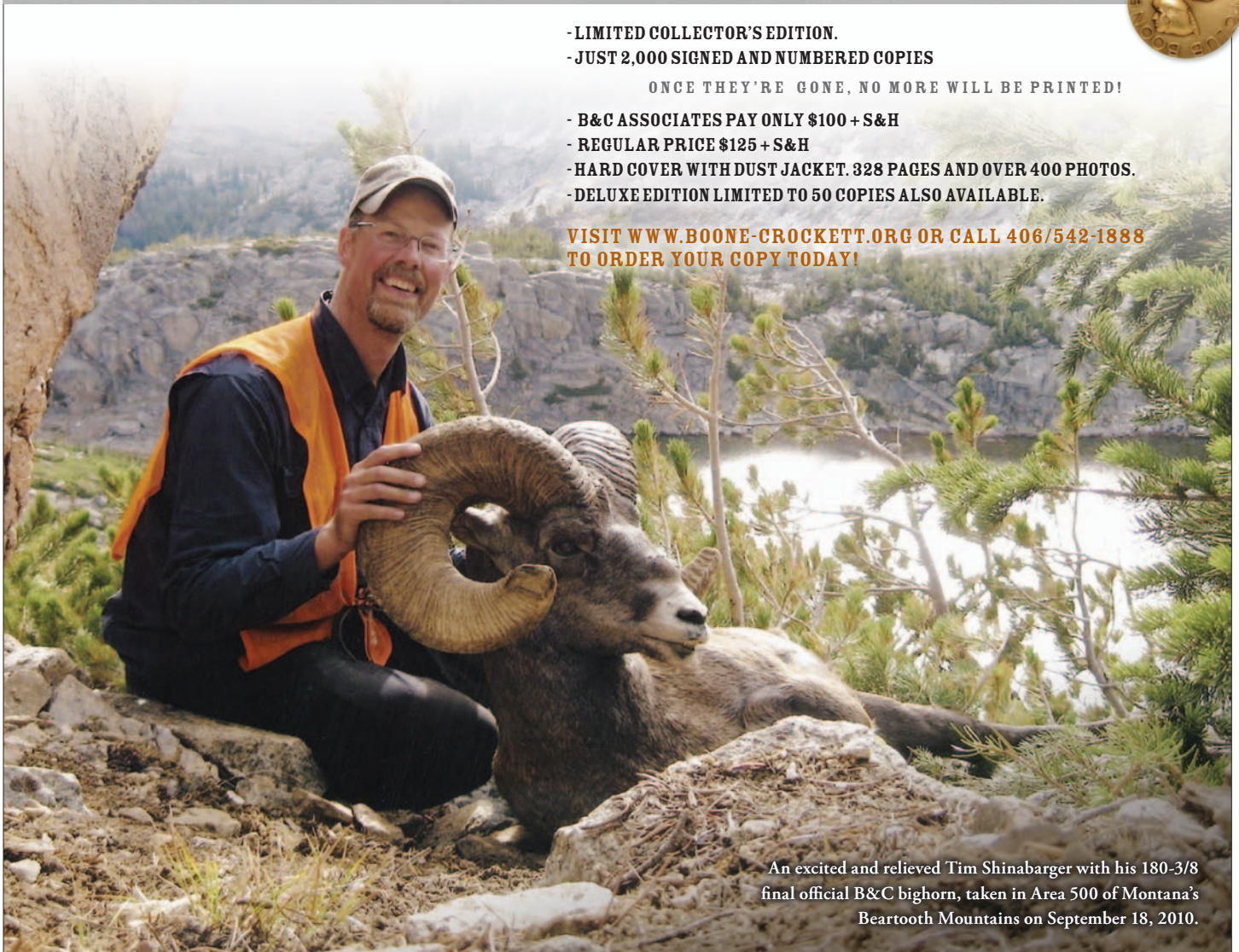


- LIMITED COLLECTOR'S EDITION.
- JUST 2,000 SIGNED AND NUMBERED COPIES

ONCE THEY'RE GONE, NO MORE WILL BE PRINTED!

- B&C ASSOCIATES PAY ONLY \$100 + S&H
- REGULAR PRICE \$125 + S&H
- HARD COVER WITH DUST JACKET. 328 PAGES AND OVER 400 PHOTOS.
- DELUXE EDITION LIMITED TO 50 COPIES ALSO AVAILABLE.

**VISIT [WWW.BOONE-CROCKETT.ORG](http://WWW.BOONE-CROCKETT.ORG) OR CALL 406/542-1888 TO ORDER YOUR COPY TODAY!**



An excited and relieved Tim Shinabarger with his 180-3/8 final official B&C bighorn, taken in Area 500 of Montana's Beartooth Mountains on September 18, 2010.

from a Wisconsin physician. Married but childless, he spent great sums on firearms—especially hunting rifles. He ended his January, 1948 letter to Alaskan big game outfitter Hosea Sarber this way:

“I’m 43 years of age and for the past 15 years have worked like hell. The past year have averaged 105 patients daily plus 265 major surgical and 65 minor operations. Now I’d like to find a place where I could kinda ease off and where I could hunt big game and fish till my heart’s content.” He broached the idea of starting a surgical practice in Alaska, noting that he’d bring his wife, “my dog and my technician.”

After that missive, the good doctor commonly signed his letters, somewhat cloyingly, “your pal and admirer.” In March he invited the Alaskan to his home: “Sarber, my office and my home will be as much yours as mine, and you can spend all the time you want with my guns...” Over the next two years the letters show an increasing attachment for the outfitter and for Alaska. He began planning a move and evidently sent Sarber several rifles.

“Hosea, [I’m buying each of us a Remington 721] in .300 H&H Magnum too... now that makes [two Remington 721s, in .270 and .300 H&H, plus two Winchester Model 70s, in .270 and .220 Swift]. These are all going to you as presents from me...”

Less than a year later, in March, 1949, he sent this note: “Won’t be long before that 23-inch .375 Magnum is in your hands, Hosea...” And in July, 1950, he told Sarber to expect a Winchester Model 70 Target rifle in .220 Swift.

The last of the letters I unearthed was dated May 14, 1951. A move was clearly imminent. “Dear Pal Hosea: ...Thursday shipped 19 boxes of rifles via express and the Alaska Steamship Company. Twelve boxes are light, but seven [average] 300 pounds or more.... am closing out my practice as of June first.... [I’m coming to Alaska to] hunt brownies, take pictures of them and shoot eagles, seals and wolves and possibly a wolverine. I am not killing another big brownie unless he is a record.... I’ll shoot him with my camera and movie outfit.”

Despite his affinity for rifles, the hunt and the company of a legendary bear guide, this fellow left Wisconsin with a battery of large-format cameras and costly lenses.

I found no correspondence from Sarber. Perhaps he knew, after many seasons

of hosting hunters, that listening was his lot.

Sometime after the doctor established a practice in Alaska, Hosea Sarber disappeared in the bush and was never heard from again.

Around 1972, a heating technician called to the late doctor’s residence found the apartment quite cramped—due in part to its 37 dozen rifles, pistols and shotguns. He politely told the widow the hundreds of boxes of ammunition blocking the furnace would be more safely stored elsewhere.

I couldn’t have had an 1898 Mauser stocked any more handsomely than Iver Henriksen stocked the .270 I carried above Spoon Creek on opening day of Oregon’s deer season. The other custom rifles that trickled through my hands from that collection were equally fine. But what sticks in memory is more than figured French and polished metal, slick actions, and tuned triggers. Sure, I recall the hunts, the shots. I can still see the animals I might have killed and those I might have let live. But vivid in my imagination is the Montana stockmaker I never met, expertly sculpting walnut before I could say my name. So too the Midwest physician pining for redemption, for another chance at life, to be someone he could never be, in a place he would find too late. They had their hands on my rifles too.

As others do now. ■

# Custom More Than A Rifle

Part of the joy of hunting hangs in your hand. Whether or not it outperforms a “factory” rifle ballistically or on target, a custom rifle can be more fun.



**Wayne’s bull dropped to a .308 Model Seven from Remington’s Custom Shop. Semi-custom rifles like this, from manufacturers, deliver upscale working rifles at less-than-custom prices.**

